

SFGATE

Finding the art in what's below

By Jessica Zack
Wednesday, January 13, 2016

David Maisel was an undergraduate at Princeton in the summer of 1983 when he accompanied his professor, the renowned photographer **Emmet Gowin**, on an expedition to Washington state to photograph the aftermath of the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption. The trip included several rides in a Cessna, the small plane banking turns for the photographers to peer into the ashen crater and document the surrounding scarred earth, entire forests flattened by the mountain's slide. "We did just enough aerial work for me to discover it was a way of both mapping the land and also abstracting the land," Maisel said recently from his studio in Sausalito. "It allows you to see things and explore spaces you wouldn't otherwise encounter, to use altitude itself as a compositional device. I was really curious then about its potential, and I've been ardently pursuing and interested in it ever since."

For more than 30 years, Maisel, who has exhibited his work internationally and published five monographs, has been exploring the captivating photographic possibilities of viewing, and exquisitely framing, airborne perspectives on the damaged Western landscape that elude us at ground level.

Particularly drawn to what he calls "sites of traumatic disturbances," Maisel leans out of helicopters (often with a door removed) and small planes anywhere from 700 to 10,000 feet in altitude, drawn to the blighting effects yet ravaged beauty of human intervention on the wild: clear-cut forests, open-pit mines, evaporation ponds and urban sprawl.

Maisel's recent series of square-format color photographs, "The Fall," on view at **Haines Gallery**, reveals in 11 "cubist landscapes" the striking beauty and inevitable decay wrought by industrial use and rapid development between the Spanish cities of Toledo and Madrid.

Maisel embarked on the project in the fall of 2013, following the completion of his commission to photograph Toledo as part of a group exhibition commemorating the 400th anniversary of the death of the painter **El Greco**. In a subtle shift away from his intense focus on environmental degradation (his 2013 retrospective is titled "Black Maps: American Landscape and the Apocalyptic Sublime"), the photographs at Haines emphasize the beauty of a well-proportioned composition. Maisel admits that his photos can have an intentionally disorienting, even subtly unnerving, effect on viewers. "The idea of defamiliarization is critical to me," he says. "By removing the horizon line and elements of scale, and working with the nontraditional square, which compacts space, they are pushed toward abstraction and away from documentary."

Above an agricultural zone in Borox, outside Toledo, the soil has a disorienting, pearlescent gray cast, "a gorgeous otherworldliness," says Maisel, while abstract Cy Twombly-esque scribbles appear in the landscape in his "Borox 6." "Those shapes and forms were riveting," he recalls. "I could have just stayed in the air all day."

Jessica Zack is a Bay Area freelance writer.

Ref: <http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Finding-the-art-in-what-s-below-6756477.php>